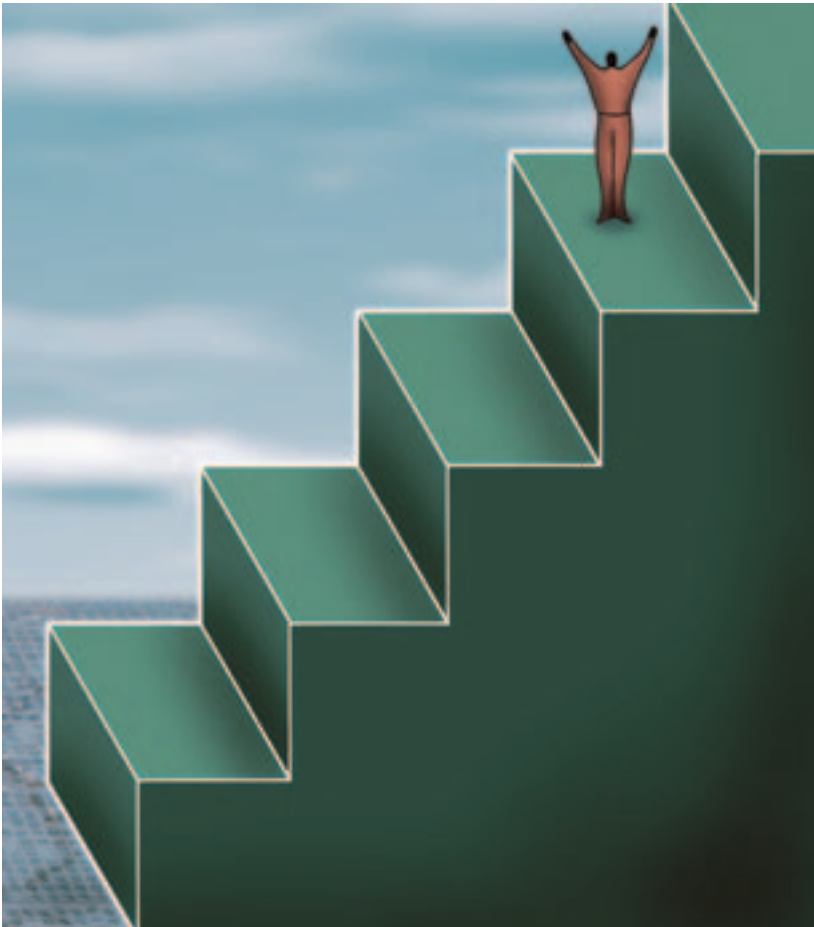


Bringing out the Best:

Four Strategies for Successful Talent Management

BY ADRIENNE HEDGER



From hiring the right people to **maximizing** individual performance and **identifying** leaders, talent management is a never-ending process. Done well, it can raise a company's game to a whole new level. What are leading companies doing to bring out the best in their **talent**? Here's a look.

EMPLOYEES ARRIVE at work, take a seat at their desks and get ready for the day. Question is: will they be giving your company their best effort? Will they be motivated to help the organization succeed? Or will they be biding their time until they can leave?

The answer has a deep impact on your company's performance and future. Which is why more and more people are talking about talent management. In fact, according to the 2007 Talent

Management survey conducted by consulting firm Knowledge Infusion and the International Association for Human Resource Information Management, 78 percent of respondents said they see talent management increasing in importance during the next three years.

Many factors are at play, including a looming talent shortage and the need to remain nimble and competitive in today's fast-paced business environment.

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"A lot has been written about the global talent shortage," says Michael C. Goldman, director of consulting services at ASSESS Systems, a Bigby Havis Company. "But in addition to this, companies are struggling to keep up with the rapid pace of change in the business world. It's not enough to just have talented employees—they also need to be flexible and adapt to new circumstances."

To achieve aggressive business goals, leading companies are turning to their most valuable resource—their employees—and looking for ways to maximize performance, motivation and succession planning. Several strategies intertwine to create an effective talent management program, including:

1. Making informed hiring decisions
2. Ensuring the right fit
3. Inspiring performance
4. Selecting the best leaders

1. Making Informed Hiring Decisions

Developing exceptional talent is a process that begins before an offer letter is even signed.

"The first question is: Are you hiring people who will succeed in your company?" says Becky Sterling, practice leader, talent management, Kenexa. "This front-end piece is so critical, but it often gets overlooked in the bigger picture of talent management."

On paper several candidates may look like a perfect fit for the job. How can a company predict who will be the most successful?

"There are wonderful tools to help with this," says Jim McCoy, senior vice president of consulting services at Veritude. "We've gotten to the point where we can predict not only who is likely to stay with the company but how likely the candidates are to perform well in various jobs."

One strategy companies are using: determine who your star performers are, then assess them to better understand the mix of skills, knowledge, abilities and traits that enable their success. This input creates a profile that can be used as a benchmark for screening candidates.

There are many scientifically validated tools to help with this assessment. "You

can automate the assessment and make it a fast, convenient process for everyone," says Sterling.

Alternatively, she notes, companies can hold informal focus groups with top performers. The goal: to build the profile of a successful employee—and ensure that your company is asking the right questions as it interviews potential new hires.

One of the most important considerations is how the candidate will fit into your corporate culture. "We've seen this issue arise many times," says Gary Schmidt, Ph.D. and president of Saville Consulting. "A person's skills and resume may indicate that they are a good fit for a job, but their style and motives may be a poor fit with the culture. These people rarely thrive or reach their full potential."

Sometimes it can be difficult to define a company's culture, let alone determine if someone is a good fit. In this case, a company can create an objective profile of its culture. For example, Saville Consulting uses its tool "Wave Culture" to profile work environments. Then potential employees take a "Wave Styles" assessment to uncover their preferred work environment. "By comparing results, it's easy to see where there are matches, and where there aren't," says Schmidt.

It can be a setback to discover that a star candidate likely won't thrive in a particular culture, but better to determine this right away, before making a costly hiring mistake.

"If you get the hiring piece right it gives you a dramatic head start in managing the talent," says Sterling.

2: Ensuring the Right Fit

Hiring the right people is important, but that's not where the issue of finding the right fit ends. Indeed, if employees are in jobs that make the most of their talent, they are far more likely to contribute meaningful results to the organization.

"Knowledge, skills and abilities are important," says Goldman, "but there is a growing awareness that other characteristics—such as personality and motivations—more often distinguish top talent. If you don't focus on this piece, you miss half the picture."

Schmidt agrees. "When people think of 'motive' they think of having 'drive' or the desire to achieve. But we need to look

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“If you’re in the wrong job, a job for which you have the **talent** but not the **motivation**, going to work is like holding a beach ball under water,” says Schmidt.

beyond that. When we talk about motive, what we’re really asking is, ‘What does this person most like to do? What do they avoid doing?’”

Skills can be taught, but if someone doesn’t like to interact with others, they aren’t going to enjoy a customer service role—no matter how much training they receive.

Indeed, when employees are in jobs that run counter to their natural motivations, this undermines performance and takes a heavy toll on the employee as well as the company.

“If you’re in the wrong job, a job for which you have the talent but not the motivation, going to work is like holding a beach ball under water,” says Schmidt. “You don’t want people to notice the strain you’re under, but keeping the ball hidden is draining your energy—energy that you could be directing toward your job and your performance.”

How are companies ensuring a good job/person match? Action needs to be taken on two fronts: One, assessing the personality traits that employees bring to the table; and two, better defining the capabilities required for jobs. This means going beyond the job description to ask: What are the key success factors for this role?

Goldman recalls an example. A large, privately owned company recently worked with ASSESS to clarify certain job positions and match the right people to the jobs. The company had grown mainly through acquisitions, and it knew that it had talented employees on the front-line sales and management ranks. But it didn’t have a clear picture of who was talented at what.

As it unified its operations, the compa-

ny redefined its sales and management roles—creating jobs that didn’t exist before. Then it used ASSESS to define key success factors for each role. After this, it assessed employees and determined which employees would be the best fit for the new roles. By understanding the jobs and the candidates, the company was able to predict who would perform well. The decisions were informed, rather than left to chance.


3: Inspiring performance

Of course even if there is a great fit between the employee and the job, it doesn’t ensure that you’ll see maximum performance from the individual. While compensation always ranks high as a motivator, so does something less tangible: a feeling of being valued.

“When we conduct focus groups and interview employees on the front line, a lot of times they tell us they feel disconnected,” says McCoy. “They don’t understand their contribution to the overall business strategy. This is a significant issue because these are sometimes the same people who are talking to your customers.”

It’s not always easy to cascade company goals all the way down through an organization, but it does make a difference to employees. It also gives managers a framework for measuring an employee’s performance in a meaningful way—and it demonstrates to employees that their work matters. “When people feel a connection to something bigger, they are more motivated,” says Sterling.

She notes that at Kenexa the CEO establishes his top three goals each quarter, then managers throughout the organization use these goals to drive their



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own goal setting. “Everyone is figuring out how they can help the company be successful,” she says. “Essentially we’re telling employees, ‘Here is what you can do to help, and here is how we’ll measure your contribution.’”

“Talent management begins with talent measurement,” adds Schmidt. And conversations about talent are no longer relegated to the annual perform-

ance review. Instead, companies are starting to examine their talent pipeline, evaluate their bench strength, and are setting goals to improve the selection, development and retention of top talent.

Organizations are also encouraging managers to have more frequent, informal discussions about performance. “We’re seeing increasing demand for our

ASSESS Review tool, which helps managers facilitate an ongoing conversation about an employee’s development,” says Goldman.

Companies aren’t just looking at the performance of individual employees, however—they are also taking a look at the talent and performance of teams. “We’ve been doing more of this type of work,” says Schmidt. “For instance, we’ll analyze an executive team to determine its strengths, how team members prefer to work, how aligned they are and so on. It’s often very enlightening for the team, and it helps them determine how they can best contribute to the company.”

4: Selecting the Best Leaders

When it comes to leadership, a whole new layer of assessment and strategy applies. Identifying leaders became significantly more difficult after organizations de-layered in the 1990s. No longer could companies watch high-performers rise through the ranks, and see the playing field narrow toward the upper levels of the company.

“Now company executives look out and see dozens or even hundreds of high potential employees who could be potential leaders,” says McCoy. “As a company executive looks out at the organization, and even into their broader industry and beyond, they need help figuring out who should be hired and/or groomed to lead their organizations in the future.”

This is a particularly urgent question as more and more baby boomers retire, leaving leadership positions open for the next generation.

The million dollar question is: will a high-performing employee be successful at the next level, one that requires a different skill set? The answer can’t be found in a 360-degree review or in past performance. “This is where assessment tools can help by giving you insight into the future,” says Schmidt.

For example, Siemens, USA is using Saville Consulting Wave to help develop its top talent. “We have a group of about 200 people who we believe are our future leaders,” says Tom Ruddy, senior director of talent management and learning for Siemens USA. “We’re

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using The Wave as part of our Emerging Leaders Forum, to help these employees understand their leadership styles and other attributes.”

The company is also analyzing the data it receives from the Wave Professional Styles questionnaire and correlating this to performance reviews and other evaluations. “Ideally, this will help us identify the key characteristics that are closely tied to continued success in our company,” says Ruddy.

It’s not unusual for star performers to falter when they take on a new position. The new job often demands an entirely new skill set, yet the employee may be clinging to their old ways of working.

That doesn’t mean they are doomed to failure, however. Another critical strategy in succession planning is making sure new leaders add value as quickly as possible.

“Our research shows that it takes a leader roughly 18 months to become fully productive in a new role,” says McCoy.

“Anything you can do to speed that timeframe up will help the business achieve its goals.”

He cites a recent Veritude client as an example. The organization hired a brand new HR leadership team—six executives in all. “Our job was to help this new group figure out how to be effective in the organization, and how to leverage their talents as a team,” says McCoy. “Within six months each team member knew their key stakeholders, how to communicate



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effectively with their audiences, and understood the cultural quirks of working in this organization. A year later they are all still there, productive and succeeding in their mission. Their retention alone was a key measure of success."

Bottom-Line Results

Ultimately, talent management goes straight to the heart of an organization—developing the people who manage the projects, complete the action items, contribute their ideas and move the company toward its goals. Because of this, talent management can deliver tangible business results.

"If you invest in talent management and leadership development, you ought to be able to measure results six, nine and 12 months out—in hard dollars, cost avoidance, revenue growth or otherwise," says McCoy.

Sterling agrees. "You need to look at the job families you're developing, then establish a metric in that area of the business. If you are developing your sales force, you want to see an increase in sales. If you're developing customer service reps, you should see an improvement on the customer satisfaction surveys."

Communicating this metric is an important part of the strategy—and ensures that employees know how success is being measured.

Eventually, well executed talent management strategies form a circular process. "If you show interest in your people through performance development programs, it helps you both attract and retain top talent," says Goldman.

Bottom line: when you keep building your ranks of strong performers, that attracts even more strong performers.

This is exactly the help that managers are looking for, says McCoy. "When we get out and talk to business-line leaders, they don't use the term 'talent management,'" he notes. "They just want three things: (1) to figure out what people they need working where, (2) to hire the best people for the jobs they need to fill and (3) to retain and develop those people to become the new leadership of the organization. By helping them do this, we can make a significant impact on the organization's performance." ■